

## THE MILLION DOLLAR MYSTERY—PART 14

out at his suburban home. Here's the address."

"How long will you hold open for me?" asked Norton, meaning how long would the city editor wait for the story.

"Till one-thirty. You ought to be back by midnight. It's only eight now."

"All right; Henderson's approachable. I may get a good story out of him."

"Maybe," thought Gregg, who had lost nothing of this conversation.

It was his opportunity. He immediately left the zone of the city desk for a telephone booth. But as he passed the line of desks and busy reporters he did not note the keen



Norton Was at His Desk.

scrutiny of a smooth faced, gray haired man who stood at the side of Norton's desk awaiting the reporter's return.

"Why, Jones," cried the surprised Norton. "What are you doing all this way from home?"

"Orders," said Jones, smiling faintly as he delivered a note to the reporter.

"Anything serious?"

"Not that I am aware of. Miss Florence was rather particular. She wanted to be sure that the note reached your hands safely."

"And do you mean to say that you came away and left her alone in that house?"

Again Jones smiled. "I left her well guarded, you may be sure of that. She will never run away again." He waited for Norton to read the note.

It was nothing more than one of those love orders to come and call at once. And she had made Jones venture into town with it! The reporter smiled and put the note away tenderly. And then he caught Jones smiling, too.

"I'm going to marry her, Jones."

"That remains to be seen," replied the butler, not unkindly.

"Well, anyhow, thanks for bringing the note. But I've got to disappoint her tonight. I'm off in a deuce of a hurry to interview General Henderson. I'll be out to tea tomorrow. You can find your way out of this old fire trap. By-by!"

The moment he turned away the smile faded from Jones' face, and with the quickness and noiselessness of a cat he reached the side of the booth in which Gregg believed himself so secure from eavesdropping. The half dozen words Jones heard convinced him that Norton was again the object of the Black Hundred's attention. He had seen the man's face that memorable night when the balloon stopped for its passenger. Before Gregg came out of the booth Jones decided to overtake him and forewarn him, but unfortunately the reporter was nowhere in sight.

There was left for Jones nothing else but to return home or follow when he came out. As this night he knew Florence to be exceptionally well guarded, both within and without the house, he decided to wait and follow the spy.

When Braine received the message he was pleased. Norton's assignment fitted his purpose like a glove. Before midnight he would have Mr. Meddler Reporter where he would bother no one for some time—if he proved tractable. If not, he would never bother any one again. Braine gave him or hers tersely. Unless Norton met with unforeseen delay, nothing could prevent his capture.

When Norton arrived at the Henderson place, a footman informed him from the veranda that General Henderson was at 49 Elm street for the evening, and it would be wise to call there. Jim nodded his thanks and set off in haste for 49 Elm street. The footman did not enter the house, but hurried down the steps and slunk off among the adjacent shrubbery. His mission was over with.

The house in Elm street was Braine's suburban establishment. He went there occasionally to hibernate, as it were, to grow a new skin when close pressed. The caretaker was a man rightly called Samson. He was a bruiser of the bounner type.

It was fast work for Braine to get out there. If the man disguised as a footman played his cards badly Braine

would have all his trouble for nothing. He disguised himself with that infernal cleverness which had long since made him a terror to the police, who were looking for ten different men instead of one. He knew that Norton would understand instantly that he was not the general; but on the other hand he would not know that he was addressing Braine.

So the arch-conspirator waited; and so Norton arrived and was ushered into the room. A single glance was enough to satisfy the reporter, always keen eyed and observant.

"I wish to see General Henderson," he said politely.

"General Henderson is doubtless at his own house."

"Ah!"

"Don't be alarmed—yet," said Braine smoothly.

"I am not alarmed," replied Norton. "I am only chagrined. Since General Henderson is not to be found here I must be excused."

"I will excuse you presently."

"Ah! I begin to see."

"Indeed!" mocked Braine.

"I have tumbled or walked into a trap."

"A keen mind like yours must have recognized that fact the moment you discovered I was not the general."

"I am indebted to the Black Hundred?" coolly.

"Precisely. We do not wish you ill, Mr. Norton."

"To be sure, no!" ironically. "What with failing safes, poisoned cigarettes, and so forth, I can readily see that you have my welfare at heart. What puzzled me was the suddenness with which these affectionate signs ceased."

"You're a man of heart," said Braine with genuine admiration. "These affectionate signs, as you call them, ceased because for the time being you ceased to be a menace. You have become that once more, and here you are!"

"And what are you going to do with me now that you have got me?"

"There will be two courses," Braine reached into a drawer and drew out a thick roll of bills. "There are here something like \$5,000."

"Quite a tidy sum; enough for a chap to get married on."

The two eyed each other steadily. And in his heart Braine sighed. For he saw in this young man's eyes incorruptibility.

"It is yours on one condition," said Braine, reaching out his foot stealthily toward the button which would summon Samson.

"And that is," interpolated Norton, "that I join the Black Hundred."

"Or the great beyond, my lad," took up Braine, his voice crisp and cold.

Norton could not repress a shiver. Where had he heard this voice before?

Braine! He stiffened.

"Murder in cold blood?" he managed to say.

"Indefinite imprisonment. Choose."

"I have chosen."

"H'm!" Braine rose and went over to the sideboard for the brandy. "I'm going to offer you a drink to show you that personally there are no hard feelings. You are in the way. After you, our friend, Jones. This brandy is not poisoned, neither are the glasses. Choose either and I'll drink first. We are all desperate men, Norton; and we stop at nothing. Your life hangs by a hair. Do you know where Hargrave is?"

Norton eyed his liquor thoughtfully.

"Do you know where the money is?" Norton smelt of the brandy.

"I am sorry," said Braine. "I should have liked to win over a head like yours."

Norton nonchalantly took out his watch, and that bit of bravado perhaps saved his life. In the case of his watch he saw a brutal face behind him. Without a tremor, Norton took up his glass.

"I am sorry to disappoint you," he said, "but I shall neither join you nor go to by-by."

Quick as a bird shadow above grass, he flung the brandy over his shoulder into the face of the man behind. Samson yelled with pain. Almost at the same instant Norton pushed over the table, upsetting Braine with it. Next he dashed through the curtains, slammed the door, and fled to the street, very shaky about the knees, if the truth is to be told.

General Henderson's views upon the latest Balkan muddle were missing from the Blade the following morning. Norton, instead of returning to the general's and fulfilling his assignment like a dutiful reporter, hurried out to Riverside to acquaint Jones with what had happened. Jones was glad to see him safe and sound.

"That new reporter started the game," he said. "I overheard a word or two while he was talking in the booth. All your telephone booths are ramshackle affairs, you use them so constantly. I tried to find you, but you were out of sight. Now, tell me what happened."

"Sh!" warned Norton as he spied Florence coming down the stairs.

"I thought you couldn't come!" she cried. "But ten o'clock!"

"I changed my mind," he replied, laughing.

He caught her arm in his and drew her toward the library. Jones smiled after them with that enigmatical smile of his, which might have signified irony or affection. After half an hour's chat, Florence, quite aware that the two men wished to talk, retired.

At the door Norton told Jones what had taken place at 49 Elm street.

"Ah! we must not forget that number," mused Jones. "My advice is, keep an eye on this Gregg chap. We may get somewhere by watching him."

"Do you know where Hargrave is?" Jones scratched his chin reflectively.

Norton laughed. "I can't get anything out of you."

"Much less any one else. I'm growing fond of you, my boy. You're a man."

"Thanks; and good-night."

When Olga Perigoff called the next day Jones divested himself of his livery, donned a plain coat and hat, and left the house stealthily. Today he was determined to learn something definite in regard to this suave, handsome Russian. When she left the house Jones rose from his hiding place and proceeded to follow her. The result of this espionage on the part of Jones will be seen presently.

Meantime Jim went down to the office and lied cheerfully about his missing the general. Whether the city editor believed him or not is of no matter. Jim went over to his desk. From the corner of his eye he could see Gregg scribbling away. He never raised his head as Jim sat down to read his mail. After awhile Gregg rose and left the office; and, of course, Jim left shortly afterward. When the newcomer saw that he was being followed, he smiled and continued on his way. This Norton chap was suspicious. All the better; his suspicions should be made the hook to land him with. By and by the man turned into a drug store and Jim loitered about till he reappeared. Gregg walked with brisker steps now. It was his intention to lead Norton on a wild goose chase for an hour or so, long enough to give Braine time to arrange a welcome at another house.

Norton kept perhaps half a block in the rear of his man all the while. But for this caution he would have witnessed a little pantomime that would have put him wholly upon his guard. Turning a corner, Gregg all but bumped into the countess. He was quick enough to place a finger on his lips and motion his head toward a taxicab. Olga hadn't the least idea who was coming around the corner, but she halted the cab and was off in it before Jim swung around the corner.

Jones, who had followed the countess for something over an hour and a half, hugged a doorway. What now? he wondered. The countess knew the man. That was evidence enough for the astute butler. But what meant the pantomime and the subsequent hurry? He soon learned. The man Gregg went his way, and then Jim turned the corner. Jones cast a wistful glance at the vanishing cab of the Russian, and decided to shadow the shadower—in other words, follow the reporter, to see that nothing serious befell him.

The lurker finally paused at a door, opened it with a key, and swung it behind him, very careful, however, not to spring the latch. Naturally Jim was mightily pleased when he found the door could be opened. When Jones, not far behind, saw him open the door, he started to call out a warning, but thought the better of it. If Norton was walking into a trap it was far better that he, Jones, should remain outside of it. If Jim did not appear after a certain length of time, he would start an investigation on his own account.

No sooner was Jim in the hallway than he was set upon and overpowered. They had in this house what was known as "the punishment room." Here traitors paid the reckoning and were never more heard of. Into this room Jim was unceremoniously dropped when Braine found that he could get no information from the resolute reporter.

The room did not look sinister, but for all that it possessed the faculty of growing smaller and smaller, slowly or swiftly, as the man above at the lever willed. When Jim was apprised



In the Case of His Watch He Saw a Brutal Face Behind Him.

of this fact, he ran madly about in search of some mode of escape, knowing full well in his heart that he should not find one.

Presently the machinery began to work and Norton's tongue grew dry with terror. They had him this time; there was not the least doubt of it. And they had led him there by the nose into the bargain.

Twenty minutes passed, and Jones concluded it was time for him to act. He went forward to try the door, but this time it was locked. Jones, however, was not without resource. The house next door was vacant, and he found a way into this, finally reaching the roof. From this he jumped to the other roof, found the scuttle open, and crept down the stairs, flight after flight, till the whirr of a motor arrested him.

Conspirators are often overreager, too. So intent were the rascals upon the business at hand that they did not notice the door open slowly. It did not take the butler more than a moment to realize that his friend and any was near certain death. With

an oath he sprang into the room, gave Braine a push which sent him down to join the victim, and pitched into the other two. It was a battle royal while it lasted. Jones knocked down one of them, yelled to Norton, and kicked the rope he saw down into the pit. One end of this rope was attached to a ring in the wall. And up this rope Norton swarmed after he had disposed of Braine. The tide of battle then swung about in favor of the butler, and shortly the fake reporter and his



Up This Rope Norton Swarmed.

companion were made to join their chief.

Jones stopped the machinery. He could not bring himself to let his enemies die so horribly. Later he knew he would regret this sentiment.

When the people came, summoned by some outsider who had heard the racket of the conflict, there was no one to be found in the pit. Nor was there any visible sign of an exit.

There was one, however, built against such an hour and known only to the chiefs of the Black Hundred.

And still the golden tinted band notes reposed tranquilly in their hiding place!

### CHAPTER XVIII.

#### The Masked Ball.

About this time—that is to say, about the time the Black Hundred was stretching out its powerful secret arms toward Norton—there arrived in New York city a personage. This personage was the Princess Parlova, a fabulously rich Polish Russian. She leased a fine house near Central park and set about to conquer social New York. This was not very difficult, for her title was perfectly genuine and she moved in the most exclusive diplomatic circles in Europe, which, as everybody knows, is the most brilliant in the world. When the new home was completely decorated, she gave an elaborate dinner, and that attracted the newspapers. They began to talk about her highness, printed portraits of her, and devoted a page occasionally in the Sunday editions. She became something of a rage. One morning it was announced that the Princess Parlova would give a masked ball to formally open her home to society; and it was this notice that first brought the Princess Parlova under Braine's eyes. He was at the Perigoff apartment at the time.

"Well, well!" he mused aloud.

"What is it?" asked Olga, turning away from the piano and ending one of Chopin's mazurkas brokenly.

"Here is the Princess Parlova in town."

"And who is she?"

"She is the real thing, Olga; a real princess with vast estates in Poland with which the greedy Slav next door has been very gentle."

"I haven't paid much attention to the social news lately. What about her?"

"She is giving a masked ball to formally open her house on the West side. And it's going to cost a pretty penny."

"Well, you're not telling me this to make me want to know the princess," said Olga, petulantly.

"No. But I'm going to give you a letter of introduction to her highness."

"Oh!"

"And you are going to ask her to invite two particular friends of yours to this wonderful ball of hers."

"Indeed," ironically. "That sounds all very easy."

"Easier than you think, my child."

"I will not have you call me child!"

"Well, then, Olga."

"That's better. Now, how will it be easier than I think?"

"Simply this, the Princess Parlova is an oath bound member, but has not been active for years."

"Oh!" Olga was all animation now.

"Go on!"

"You will go to her with a letter of introduction—no! Better than that, you will make a formal call and show her this ring. You know the ring," he said, passing the talisman to the countess. "Show this to her and she will

obey you in everything. She will have no alternative."

"Very good," replied Olga. "And then the program is to insist that she invite Florence and that fool of a reporter to this ball. Then what?"

"You can leave that to me."

"Haven't all these failures been a warning?"

"No, my dear. I was born optimistic; but there's a jinx somewhere in one of my pockets. Time after time I've had everything just where I wanted it, and then—poof! It's pure bald luck on their side, but sooner or later the wheel will turn. And any chance that offers I am bound to accept. Somehow or other we may be able to trap Florence and Norton. I want both of them. If I can get them snugly away, Jones will be forced to draw in Hargrave."

"Is there such a man?"

"You saw him that night at the restaurant."

"I have often thought that perhaps I just dreamed it." She turned again to the piano and began humming idly.

"Stop that and listen to me," said Braine, not in quite the best of tempers. "I'm in no mood for whims."

"Music does not soothe your soul, then?" cynically.

"If I had one it might. You will call on the Princess Parlova tomorrow afternoon. It depends upon you what my plans will be. I think you'll have little trouble in getting into the presence of her highness, and once there she will not be able to resist you."

"I'll go."

And so she did. The footman in green livery hesitated for a moment, but the title on the visiting card was quite sufficient. He bowed the countess into the reception room and went in search of his distinguished mistress.

The Princess Parlova was a handsome woman verging upon middle age. She was a patrician; Olga's keen eye discerned that instantly. She came into the reception room with that dignified serenity which would have impressed any one as genuine. She held the card in her fingers and smiled inquiringly toward her guest.

"I confess," she began, "that I recall neither your face nor your name. I am sorry. Where have I had the honor of meeting you before?"

"You have never met me before, your highness," answered Olga sweetly.

"You came on a charity errand, then?"

"That depends, your highness. Will you be so good as to glance at this?" Olga asked, holding out her palm upon which the talisman lay.

The princess shrank back, paling.

"Where did you get that?" she panted.

"From the head," was the answer.

"And you have followed me from Russia?" whispered the princess, her terror growing.

"Oh, no. The Black Hundred is as strongly organized here as in St. Petersburg. But we always keep track of old members, especially when they stand so high in the world as yourself."

"But I was deceived and betrayed!" exclaimed the princess. "They urged me to join on the ground that the organization was to attempt to bring about the freedom of Poland."

Olga shrugged. "You were rich, highness. The Black Hundred needed money."

"And you need it now?" eagerly, believing that she saw a loophole.

"How much? Oh, I will give a hundred thousand rubles on your promise to leave me alone. Tell me!"

"I am sorry, your highness, but I have no authority to accept such an offer. Indeed, my errand is far from being expensive. All the Black Hundred desires is four invitations to this ball which you are soon to give. That should not cause you any alarm. We shall not interfere with your sojourn in America in any way whatsoever, provided these invitations are issued."

"You would rob my guests?" horrified.

"Positively not! Here is a list of four names. Invite them; that is all you have to do. Not so much as a silver spoon will be found missing. This is on my word of honor, and I never break that word, if you please."

"Give me the list," said the princess, wearily. "Who gave you that ring?"

"The head."

"In Russia?"

"No; here in America." Olga dipped into her handbag and produced a slip of paper. This she handed to the princess. "Here is the list, highness."

"Who is Florence Hargrave?"

"A friend of mine," evasively.

"Does she belong to the organization?"

"No."

"Then you have some ulterior purpose in having me invite her?"

"I have," answered Olga sharply; "but that does not concern your highness in the least."

The princess bit her lips. "I see your name here also; a man named Braine, and another, Norton."

"Say at once that you do not care to execute the wishes—the commands—of the order," said Olga coldly.

"I will do as you wish. And I beg you now to excuse me. But if anything happens to any of my personal friends—"

"Well?" haughtily from Olga.

"Well, I will put the matter in the hands of the police."

"But so long as your personal friends are not concerned?"

"I shall then of necessity remain deaf and blind. It is one of the penalties I must pay for my folly. I wish you good-day."

"And also good riddance!" murmured Olga under her breath as she

mured Olga under her breath as she rose and started for the hallway.

Thus it was that when Norton went to the office the next afternoon he found a broad white envelope on his desk. Indifferently he opened the same and his eyes bulged. "Princess Parlova requests" and so forth and so on. Then he shrugged. The chief had probably asked for the invitation and he would have to write up the doings, a phase of reportorial work eminently distasteful to him. He went up to the city desk.

"Can't you find some one else to do this stuff?" he growled to the city editor.

The city editor glanced at the card and crested envelope. "Good Lord, man! Nobody in this office had anything to do with that. What luck! Our Miss Hayes tried all manner of schemes, but was rebuffed on all sides. How the deuce did you chance to get one?"

"Search me," said the bewildered Norton.

"If I were you I'd sit tight and take it all in," advised the editor. "It's going to be the biggest splurge of its kind we've had in years. We've been working every wire we know to get Miss Hayes inside, but it was no go. This princess is not onto the game yet. In this country you get into society or you don't through the Sundays."

"Hanged if I know who wished this thing on me."

"Take it philosophically," said the editor sarcastically. "The princess won't bite you. She may even have seen your picture—"

"Get out!" grumbled Norton, turning away.

He would go out and see Florence. On the way out to Riverdale he came to the conclusion that the list of the princess fell short and some friend of his who was helping the woman out suggested his name. It was the only way he could account for it.

But when he learned that Florence had an invitation exactly like his own and that she received it that morning he became suspicious.

"Jones, what do you think of it?" he questioned.

"I think it was very kind of the Countess Perigoff suggesting your name and that of Florence," said the butler urbanely.

"Olga?" cried Florence, disappointedly.

"It is the only logical deduction I can make," declared Jones. "They are both practically Russians."

"And what would you advise?" asked Norton.

"Why, go and enjoy yourselves. Forewarned is forearmed. The thing is, be very careful not to acquaint any one with the character of your disguise, least of all the Countess Perigoff. Besides," Jones added smiling, "perhaps I may go myself."

"Goody! I've read about masked balls and have always been crazy to go to one," said Florence with eagerness.

"Suppose we go at once and pick out some costumes?" suggested Norton.

"Just as soon as I can get my hat on," replied Florence, happy as a lark.

"But mind," warned Jones; "be sure that you see the costume alone and that no one else is about."

"I'll take particular care," agreed Norton. "We've got to do some hustling to find something suitable. For

a big affair like this the town will be ransacked. All aboard! There's room for two in that car of mine; and we can have a spin besides. Hang work!"

Florence laughed, and even Jones permitted a smile (which was not grim this time) to stir his lips.

A happy person